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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S NATIONAL INDIGENOUS GROUPS CONGRESS
FORGES UNITY, OUTLINES CONCERNS

¶1. Summary: The National Organization for the Indigenous in Colombia (ONIC) held its Seventh Congress December 9-14, declaring unity among all indigenous groups in South America and calling for protection of indigenous communities and their way of life. Complaints ran high against private investment, free trade agreements and aerial spraying. Delegates demanded territorial land rights and government assistance in security, education and health programs. The group also denounced violence against the indigenous, as well as displacement, stigmatization and discrimination. Indigenous groups account for 1.4 million, or less than 2%, of Colombia's population. End Summary.

Self-governance and Indigenous Rights

¶2. The National Organization for the Indigenous in Colombia (ONIC) held its Seventh Congress in Ibagu , Tolima December 9-14. Nearly 3000 participants met in an outdoor pavilion at the University of Tolima to discuss land rights, health and education projects, and human rights issues. Amid chantings by medicine men, communal cooking and handicraft displays, speakers called for indigenous unity and empowerment through self-governance. ONIC president Luis Evelis Andrade Casama said self-governance and the fight for the indigenous way of life are threatened by commercialization, globalization and government indifference. In a series of resolutions, ONIC voiced support for indigenous throughout South America, particularly for its "brother," Bolivian President Evo Morales. Resolutions also criticized Colombia's forestry law, rural development law and free trade as "grave risks" to indigenous groups because they allegedly undermine indigenous rights to determine the use of territory and resources.

Rally Against Private Investment and Spraying

¶3. Joanne Washington, an ONIC coordinator, voiced disappointment over the lack of media interest in the event and absence of high level officials invited to the conference. ONIC's president publicly recognized the USG alongside the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR) and the European Commission for attending the conference. In private conversations, attendees told us they were surprised at the USG presence, especially in light of strong criticisms of aerial spraying and free trade, but said they appreciated the willingness to listen to their concerns. We highlighted USG assistance for indigenous through USAID's

projects on alternative development, infrastructure, food security, justice and governance programs. The USG has committed to invest over \$6 million between 2005-2008 through USAID's alternative development program for indigenous projects. Assistance to these communities focuses on strengthening indigenous governing councils, inter-cultural exchanges among indigenous groups, cultural preservation, building social infrastructure, and promoting environmental awareness.

¶4. Andrew Miller of U.S.-based Amazon Watch told us land rights and opposition to private development were a hot topic at this year's Congress. Ecopetrol, Colombia's state oil company, is viewed as a threat to the livelihood of U'wa groups in Norte de Santander, Boyaca and Arauca departments. Many speakers criticized President Uribe's Democratic Security policy, which they said leads to increased violence against the indigenous. Dario Mejia, ONIC's Education and Intercultural Coordinator, said aerial spraying has caused illness and displacement among the indigenous. He cited an ONIC study that concluded 47 indigenous people are displaced daily (9% of total). Members of the Senu tribe in Cauca said they recognized GOC's efforts to improve security in general, but complained of being ignored by the government. Lack of basic needs, including housing, food and health, remains a serious problem. They preferred manual eradication to aerial spraying.

Violence and Displacement Among Concerns

¶5. ONIC officials expressed concern over arbitrary

detention, physical threats, forced displacement, armed violence and criminal recruitment. ONIC also defines as human rights "violations" the negative impacts of multinational projects, spraying, stigmatization and discrimination, occurring mostly in Cauca, Putumayo and Guajira departments. Reports of increased violence against indigenous women were also highlighted. ONIC claimed that for all "violations" that occurred between 1998-2007, the GOC is responsible for 61%, paramilitary for 20%, and guerrillas for 7%. During that ten year period, 67,749 indigenous were displaced, 1897 leaders killed, 434 disappeared and 242 kidnapped, according to ONIC data. Indigenous groups account for 1.4 million, or less than 2%, of Colombia's total population. The GOC has granted over 30% of its national territory to protected indigenous communities (resguardos).

Nichols